

Call to Europe IV Conference
"Building Solidarity in asylum policy"
(Brussels, 5th November 2014)

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Friends,

We have come together here to discuss Building solidarity in asylum policy and I want to thank the Foundation for European Progressive Studies for giving me the floor to open this interesting debate.

I want to welcome this conference of Call to Europe as a new opening for a crucial, even if difficult debate on migration and asylum policies in Europe. This FEPS initiative is invaluable for us, not just as a theoretical discussion, but also because it can directly feed into the formulation of better and stronger, more progressive policies.

This conference is the beginning of a journey, and a FEPS research programme that will be carried out through 2015. A journey that will contribute to the debates taking place in our political family on shaping a new progressive migration and asylum narrative.

And let us be frank. We, socialists, need this narrative. Because even if we have the right policies and principles, the public discourse is still monopolised by populists and we are too often seen on the defensive. I want us to have open-minded debates that put solidarity and hope at the centre. A debate that is the opposite of fear, xenophobia, populism.

This is a major task, but we are certain that the new project of FEPS can help advancing in this area - and we wish all the possible best of luck to the Steering committee, rapporteurs and researchers already involved - we hope to cooperate closely and look forward to your findings and proposals.

I want to be brief to give you the floor for the debates and for constructive ideas we can then take back to our parties.

What is our starting point? What is the framework that we as social democrats should operate under? Let us look at the main issues which I think we should develop today, starting with the most important thing first:

1. First: Every life counts.

Friends,

Last year, more than 400 thousand persons applied for international protection in the EU, that is 30 % more compared to 2012.

We all have in mind tragedies off the coast of Lampedusa and elsewhere, resulting in the thousands of deaths. This is simply unacceptable!

There have been some initiatives such as the establishment of the Task Force Mediterranean and the Mare nostrum operation. But so much more has to be done to protect lives!

What we need now is a real and strong European response because migration is not a Maltese, a Greek, an Italian or a Bulgarian issue.

EU countries cannot deal with the matter on their own.

And of course Europe cannot take in everyone.

But we are the richest continent in the world.

We can do more.

If we act together.

Look for solutions together.

And shoulder our responsibilities together.

2. Second: we need a fully implemented common European Asylum System

Friends,

We have a Common European Asylum System. But we need our Common European Asylum System to be fully implemented. So much more remains to be done to better share responsibilities.

Numbers of people arriving vary widely between countries;

Numbers of people asking for asylum vary widely between countries;

And numbers of people receiving refugee status also vary widely between EU countries.

This is not normal in an integrated Europe.

Solidarity should be the main principle we must refer to when dealing with this topic and it must be followed by all the EU countries.

Solidarity with the people seeking protection, but also solidarity between Member states.

We believe we can act in a pragmatic and practical way, by using existing tools.

We need to increase resettlement of refugees.

We need to exchange best practices and expertise.

We need to engage more in relocation.

Countries could pool reception capacities to support reception in cases of mass arrivals;

And we should focus more on integrating refugees.

And boost the role of the European Asylum Support Office in Malta, in monitoring the quality and consistency of asylum decisions, and support Member States with mass arrivals.

3. Third: Legal Migration can turn migration into a real opportunity for all

The debate today is of course broader than asylum policy.

It also has to do with migrants who seek a better life in Europe, without however being in specific need of protection in the sense that they are refugees.

If migration poses challenges, it also offers a tremendous opportunity that Europe should not miss. Migration can enrich our continent culturally, economically, socially. Europe is an ageing continent. Migrants can, and do, play a key role in revitalising our economies, and large parts of the real economy, of our labour markets rely to a great extent on their positive contribution.

But we must manage migration as best we can, in line with our progressive values and clear principles. Our policies must tackle two fundamental issues.

First, Europe needs a solid system of legal migration.

We, social-democrats, are in favour of well-organised, orderly legal immigration.

Because irregular migration is uncontrolled and unfair for everyone involved.

It exposes migrants to many, and sometimes deadly risks. Opening legal migration channels is one of the best ways to fight against smuggling and trafficking of human beings.

Irregular migration leaves people alone and without the necessary access to basic social services.

And it leaves the host state without the means to fully operate.

Second, we need to foster active integration and inclusion policies. We want migrants to be integrated as full members of society, be free from discrimination and contribute to their new homes. Integration means ensuring equal human and social rights to migrants, free and fair mobility, access to the labour market and to education, but also engagement of local communities in the host countries in order to guarantee inclusion efforts to be a success.

It is up to us to really transform migration – often perceived as a problem – into an opportunity for all involved.

4. Fourth: stronger cooperation with third countries

Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

By its very nature, the question we are discussing today is both internal, European and international.

We must also step up our cooperation with third countries, and this involves two main things.

First, it involves helping tackle the root causes of migration.

We need to promote development in migrants' home countries to improve their living standards. The EU should focus on the promotion of democracy through development cooperation aiming at helping socio-economic progress for all, but also by supporting political pluralism, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights.

Second, we must also do more to foster cooperation in managing migration flows together with our international partners.

We need to increase dialogue and cooperation with non-EU countries to better manage migration. Migration has to be a key issue in all our international relations, particularly with the transit countries in North Africa, such as Libya, and the countries of origin to the South and to the East.

We must of course ensure that all operations respect fundamental rights and the principle of non refoulement, which is a cornerstone of asylum and of international refugee law.

5. Our 6 principles

Before giving the floor let me just remind us all of the 6 principles for a progressive asylum and migration policy that we have defined during the last European Elections campaign.

First principle: Every life counts.

Secondly: Europe is a continent of immigration. But we are a continent without a migration policy!

Thirdly: the European Union must seek good cooperation with countries of origin and transit countries to foster development as well as cooperation in managing migration together.

Fourthly, we should act together in a spirit of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility among all 28 Member States.

Fifthly, we need to provide Europe with an orderly, rule-based approach to migration which does everything it can to avoid driving desperate people into the hands of criminals.

Sixth point, when discussing measures on migration we need to take into consideration a long-term vision.

6. Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

We can't leave this field to the extremists. Let me frank. As socialist, we can do better to have a common, convincing progressive approach. Otherwise we will let the politics of fear to drive the debate and we know who will benefit from that.

We want a Europe that welcomes all those who have a right to be here and integrates them to make our societies more thriving.

Let me thank the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, its President Massimo D'Alema and secretary general Ernst Stetter for organising this seminar and for launching this long term reflection on such a complex topic. Today's seminar, the reflections in the new issue of FEPS magazine "Queries" with its in-depth and varied progressive insights from across the continent, and the process that is being launched will all provide invaluable contributions to our collective efforts.

I look forward to what I am certain will be a very fruitful and constructive day.

Thank you